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ABSTRACT

Although psychologists have been investigating locus of control for more than two decades, few studies have examined how locus of control interacts with affective variables. To investigate the function of locus of control on arousal patterns and expressions of anger, 120 college students (60 internals, 60 externals, as measured by Rotter's (1966) Internal External Scale) rated their degree of anger and indicated their preferred response to written descriptions of 12 potentially anger-arousing situations. An analysis of the results showed that internals and externals did not differ significantly in extent of anger arousal. However, internals were more apt to deal directly and flexibly with anger-producing situations, and externals were more prone to cope with their anger through internalizing or displacement mechanisms. Further analysis of the situations that produced the most anger in both internals and externals suggests that anger arousal may be more a situational than a dispositional variable. (Author/BL)

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Arousal and Expression of Anger: A Function of Locus of Control?

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Abstract

Internal and external locus of control individuals rated their degree of anger and indicated their preferred response to written descriptions of 12 potentially anger-arousing situations. Internals and externals did not differ significantly in extent of anger arousal but internals were more apt to deal directly and flexibly with anger-producing situations, whereas externals were more prone to cope with their anger through internalizing or displacement mechanisms. Results were discussed in terms of situational versus dispositional concepts and psychoanalytic theory.

Arousal and Expression of Anger: A Function of Locus of Control?

Locus of control continues to interest psychologists after more then two decades of research that has related it to numerous cognitive, social, education, and behavioral variables (Lefcourt, 1972; Phares, 1976; Rotter, 1966). Relatively little attention has been given, however, to how locus of control interacts with emotional factors or affective dimensions of personality. A literature review by the author covering the years 1954-1981 revealed only 12 studies, out of hundreds published, that reported on locus of control and affective variables. Ten of these related locus of control to anxiety (Berman, 1973; Feather, 1967; Giorgis, 1978; Goss & Morosko, 1970, Hountras & Scharf, 1970; Kiehlbauch, 1968; Platt & Eisenman, 1968; Ray & Katahn, 1968; Sullivan, 1977; Watson, 1967). Two investigations (Abramowitz, 1969; Borovay, 1977) found a positive relationship between external control and depression. The present study examined the question of whether internals and externals differ in their reactions to potentially anger-arousing situations.

Previous research has indicated internals possess characteristics that should result in less emotional arousal when confronted with situations that could produce anger feelings. Internals were more competent (Throop & MacDonald, 1971), more self-confident (Lindskold & Tedeschi, 1970), less maladjusted (Platt & Eisenman, 1968), and employ a higher number of effective coping mechanisms (Anderson, 1974). These findings are also consistent with the expectation that internals would

be more likely to express their anger feelings in active, direct ways. Externals, however, because they tend to feel powerless (Seeman, 1967), initiate fewer controlling actions (Gore & Rotter, 1963; Strickland, 1965) and engage in less active commerce with their environment (Lefcourt & Wine, 1969) could be expected to handle their anger feelings through indirect mechanisms such as displacement, somatization or fantasy. Abramowitz's (1969) finding that externals experience more depression, and psychoanalytic theory which views depression as anger turned inward (Davison & Neale, 1978) offer additional support for such expectation.

The present study tested two hypotheses. The first was that internal locus of control individuals will report significantly less anger arousal than externals when confronted with potentially anger-arousing situations. The second hypothesis was that internals will prefer to cope with their anger through direct verbal or behavioral expression, whereas externals will express anger more frequently through indirect means such as somatization or displacement.

Method

Subjects

The initial pool of subjects consisted of 320 male and female undergraduates enrolled in lower division psychology classes at Westmont College and Santa Barbara City College. All were volunteers who received several points added to their course grade for participation. Inquiry subsequent to data collection indicated none was familiar with the locus of control concept.

Measures

Locus of control was measured using Rotter's (1966) scale consisting of 23 items with higher scores indicating a more external locus of control. To measure anger arousal and responses, the author developed a set of 12 written descriptions of situations that had potential to cause anger feelings. For example, one incident involved a scene of several children hurting an animal as follows: "You are walking through a neighborhood on the way to visit a friend. Up ahead you see a cluster of young boys and as you come near you observe that they are tormenting a small cat. The animal is thin and acts as if it is sick. The boys are laughing as they attempt to outdo one another in their abuse of the cat." Other situations included experiences such as extended "red tape" credit problems due to computer errors, a rigid public employee that causes you major inconvenience, etc.[1]

Subjects rated their degree of anger arousal for each situation on a scale ranging from no anger (zero) to extreme anger (seven). They then indicated their preferred response by marking one out of a list of seven statements (e.g., "my probable response would be . . . some physical action at that time directed toward the object of my anger"). The seven options included a direct response (verbal or physical), an indirect response (verbal or physical), a fantasy or somatic response, and an "other response," which subjects were asked to describe. A subject's modal response was used for data analysis.

Data were collected in regular class sessions. The investigator first clarified the difference between a difuse feeling of frustration

and a specific feeling of anger and pointed out that while subjects might feel some sense of frustration in all the situations described, they might or might not feel angry. Likewise, subjects were asked to rate the degree of anger personally felt rather than a presumed socially acceptable level. No subjects reported difficulty with these directions.

From the initial pool of subjects, the sixty highest and sixty lowest scores on the I-E scale were selected in order to create groups clearly distinct in locus of control. Thus data analysis was performed on two groups consisting of 60 internals and 60 externals.

Results and Discussion

Locus of control scores for the 60 internals ranged from one to six. For the 60 externals, the scores ranged from 14 to 20. The mean score for internals was 4.21 and for externals it was 15.78. Consistent with previous findings on college students (Rotter, 1966), the mean for externals was less extreme than found on less homogeneous populations.

Mean anger-arousal scores for internals and externals were 3.96 and 4.19, respectively. The first hypothesis, that internals would report less anger arousal than externals, was not supported $F(1.158) = 1.17$, n.s. The second hypothesis, that internals would tend to cope with anger arousal through direct expression, while externals would express anger indirectly through mechanisms such as somatization or displacement, was tested by Chi-square to assess independence of anger response preference and internal-external orientation. Inspection of the occasional "other response" preferences described by subjects

revealed that these did, in fact, readily fit into either the direct, indirect, or fantasy-somatization categories. Therefore, these responses were classified and tabulated accordingly. The results, which appear in Table 1, support the hypothesis: $\chi^2 = 24.3$ (2), $p < .01$.

Insert Table 1 about here

The present study provides evidence that internals and externals do prefer to handle their anger feelings differently, though neither group would appear more prone to become angry with the other. A further analysis of the data suggested a possible explanation for the absence of a significant difference in degree of anger felt by the two groups to the set of potentially anger-arousing situations. A rank-ordering of the total anger-arousal scores to each of the 12 situations indicated that both internals and externals selected the same three situations as producing the most anger. This suggests that anger arousal may be a situational rather than a dispositional variable. That is, factors present in a set of circumstances may be more important than personality attributes of the observer in creating anger feelings.

How one prefers to cope with personal anger, however, seems more tied to the degree of control the individual feels over life. From Table 1 it can be seen that internals are more likely to take some direct action whereas externals tend to deal with anger through displacement mechanisms or to internalize their feelings. These results are consistent with the psychoanalytic theory of depression as anger turned inward and the Abramowitz (1969) and Borovay (1977) studies showing externals as more depressed.

Further studies using anger-arousing situations involving filmed or live staged spisodes, and subjects other than college students, would provide more evidence regarding the possibility that anger arousal is related to situational rather than dispositional factors. The present research also raises the question of whether internals and externals cope differently with other emotions.

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Footnote

[1]Copies of the full set of anger-arousing situations are available from the author on request.

Table 1

Anger Response Frequencies

	Internals	Externals
Direct Response (verbal, physical)	52	26
Displaced Response (verbal, physical)	6	22
Internalized Response (fantasy, somatization)	2	12